Revamping Sri Lanka's image abroad: Govt. public diplomacy needs a fresh approach

by Srinath Fernando

Successful prosecution of war against the LTTE brought sanity and security to all the inhabitants of Sri Lanka and it extended the validity of the constitution throughout the length and breadth of the island. It also brought, to an unknown extent, stability to national security concerns of India as the LTTE's air arm/secret airfields in the northern part of Sri Lanka and possible future secret airfields in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu would have had wider ramifications. This article seeks to discuss the need to revamp the public diplomacy efforts abroad of the Government of Sri Lanka(GOL). Allegations of war crimes by Presidential candidate General Sarath Fonseka are nothing new to international community. Even prior to the final phase of the war, there have been satellite photographs, taken unknown to the Government of Sri Lanka by various parties and exposed the army shelling, in what was described as being a humanitarian operation instead of an offensive land battle.

There was also a Press Communiqué issued by the Office of the President clearly stating that use of heavy guns have been rendered silent. In the run up to the election, government seems to be capitalizing on the controversial remark made by Gen. Fonseka apparently to take political mileage out of it under the current circumstances and Fonseka too is no doubt driving a wedge between the Government and the US in the wake of Robert Blake's recent remarks over elevating the relations between Sri Lanka and the US. Besides an ideal marketing gimmick for the Tamil sympathy vote. By all accounts, Sri Lanka needs a fresh approach to its public diplomacy efforts worldwide. Verbal utterances by various ministers and officials seem to have aggravated the situation. Most recent among the threat issued by an Oxford educated scholar/ Minister that legal action would be taken against the mighty European Union. EU has been insisting on the government to implement international laws and conventions as such it would be interesting to know on what basis the legal action will be instituted. These remarks further drift apart the position of Sri Lanka and it will soon be identified with the countries like Zimbabwe. Ex-Ambassador Dayan Jayathilake won the day in Geneva but he lost his balance/ground over his remarks criticizing Israel. Diplomacy is about conducting foreign relations with tact and this hullabaloo percolates in to effectiveness in our foreign relations.

Fonseka had, in a video-recorded interview with a leading daily English news paper had stated that US Government had interviewed Gotabhaya Rajapakse and he had chosen not to disclose the matter to the public. Gen Fonseka alluded that Rajapakse might have implicated Fonseka of excesses on the battleground. There have been references in the media lately that Gen Fonseka's allegations are in breach of the Official Secrets Act. What Gotabhaya Rajapake had discussed with the US Government is not in the public domain, and Foreign Minister Bogollagama had told US Ambassador that Gen Fonseka is privy to privileged information. The Official Secrets Act comes into play only if the orders were legally made and whereas the Fonseka's allegations seem to touch on an unlawful order from outside the confines of the army command structure.

There were also media reports confirming that Dr Palitha Kohona had received SMS/text messages through various foreign intermediaries that LTTE top rankers were willing to surrender and his reply had been to follow normal procedure in such exercises in the battlefield. These facts are in fact known to the international community. It would be interesting to quote the news report in the UK's *The Independent* newspaper (May 20, 2009). It says: "The desperate efforts of two senior LTTE leaders trapped in the war zone to save their lives were revealed as it emerged they were shot dead as they prepared to surrender to Sri Lankan government forces. In a flurry of emails, text messages and telephone calls that passed between NGOs, a foreign government and Sri Lankan officials in Colombo, the two LTTE political leaders frantically inquired as to how they could give themselves up. They were told: 'Get a piece of white cloth, put up your hands and walk towards the other side in a non-threatening manner.' But the attempt to surrender by Balasingham Nadesan, head of the LTTE's wing, and Seevaratnam Pulidevan, who led the rebels' peace secretariat, failed. Sometime between midnight on May 17 and the early hours of the next morning, the two men were shot dead. LTTE officials overseas claim the two men were killed by government troops as they approached them bearing a white flag. Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan government has suggested the two men may have been shot dead by LTTE fighters, angry at them fleeing the conflict zone."

We should not underestimate the pro-LTTE lobby and pro-separatist lobby. The are many who may be against the actions of the LTTE but in favour of a separate state for Tamils and convergence of these two lobbies in the absence of LTTE military wing would bring more pressure to Sri Lanka. Tamil lobby in the foreign countries are strong enough to mount an aggressive stance towards the GoSL and there is not a counter move by the pro-GoSL lobby in these countries. Norway, for instance, has parliamentary constituents with strong Tamil influence and it is a legitimate exercise by the Tamils in Norway (or in any other country) to garner support from the members of the respective legislature. In most of the Western countries, there is absolute media freedom and journalists have hardly come under any threat. Degree of democary practiced in these countries in fact promotes free media. Unfortunately, most of the Sri Lankan diplomatic missions in these countries are headed by political appointees who have had no prior training nor experience in diplomacy and some may be engaged in hoarding wealth for their kith and kin taking little interest in the serious nature of diplomacy. The foreign service needs to be overhauled before public diplomacy efforts are put in place. Sri Lanka failed to provide a clear definition of the ideologies of Tamils in Sri Lanka.

The overseas audience are of the view that all the Tamils are in need of a separate state and could not distinguish Jaffna Tamils, Muslims (whose mother tongue is Tamil but identifies as being Muslims) Indian Tamils, Eastern Tamils and Colombo Tamils community etc. Even during the war, there were Tamil ministers with the Government and if they had any semblance of sympathy for Tamil cause they would have walked out of the government. Sri Lanka failed to drive the fact that there is only tiny very insignificant minority within the Tamil minority who pursues vigorously for a separate state or solution based on federalism. Of course, an acceptable solution to the crisis is long overdue but foreign perceptions on the crisis in Sri Lanka need a fresh approach.

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Soldiers advance towards the former war zone of Putumattalan in Puthukudiyiruppu in the final stages of battle *(File photo)*

Public diplomacy deals with "the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications" (As defined in the literature of University of Southern California USC Centre for Public Diplomacy). It would be worthwhile to study the public diplomacy efforts by the Israel. It has dedicated organizations in U.S and other countries to project the image of Israel and to counter any adverse propaganda against Israel. American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) based in Washington DC, is a strong lobbying organization which deals with the US Congress and Government. The *Jewish Chronicle*, a reputed Jewish newspaper in London, reported that Jewish lobby in UK had protested to the Government of Israel over the credentials of the then Israeli Ambassador to London as he was unfit for the post and demanded a more experienced and qualified person for the job.

This was how Israeli lobby worked all over the world.

During 1983 riots, there was a similar drift. The country was on fire and there were tremendous amount of adverse media reports in foreign countries on the evolving ethnic situation in Sri Lanka which fuelled different perceptions about Sri Lanka.

Most of the diplomatic missions were headed by the diplomats from the Tamil community and their very families and relatives were being killed and properties looted and destroyed and no one was bold enough to come out in support of the very government they represented. There was nothing the JRJ Government could do to stem the spread of violence and the government looked helpless in the ferocity of the outburst. Foreign media had a field day and all reported incidents took credence in the absence of passive official diplomacy to counter the media reports.

As far as war victory is concerned all credit must go the President, Defence Secretary and Gen Fonseka but managing the aftermath (foreign relations, Sri Lanka's image abroad in particular) was the sole responsibility of the government.

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Time to act!

The Nation (Pakistan)/ANN

The biggest failing of Pakistan's current political leadership is, arguably, its inability to appreciate that time has changed. The access to information, through the Internet and the media, has awakened the masses to the realities of political life in the country.

Even the illiterate that, unfortunately, continue to abound in our society to this day, get their daily fare of news and views from the electronic media.

They can no longer be fed on emotional slogans and empty promises.

They want the leaders to deliver and are not amused by the prime minister's admission of 'the biggest mistake' in not implementing the Charter of Democracy (CoD). Could he please tell the nation what has so far prevented the government from putting it into effect, although it had all the votes to carry the required amendments through and was all the time being urged by the civil society and major opposition party to do so?

Pakistani women hold a rally to condemn Monday's suicide bombing over a religious procession in Karachi. (AP)

When some commitment has for so long been shelved on one pretext or the other, the public would not be satisfied with a reiteration of the commitment or owning one's fault in not honouring it. The truth seems to be that the foot-dragging has been deliberate; a package of reforms, with some issues that had not been agreed upon in the CoD, has been prepared.

The story of the Parliamentary Committee on Constitutional Reforms, which is considering the package and has already held around 40 meetings without being able to sort out all disagreements, confirms the point. Besides, off and on, strange new ideas are being floated like drastically reducing the minimum age prescribed for prime ministership to make Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) Chairman Bilawal eligible for the post. One hopes it was just a passing fancy, but let us not make a fool of ourselves by giving expression to such ideas.